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Dene of the Northwest Territories

1976

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The name of the tribe of Indians was preserved by the Cree and other Indians, from the Cree word *apiyashewok*. The name referred to the style of their clothing. The dress of the Indians was like a poncho by both sexes were alike with a point or apex at the back and front.

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Northwest Territories INFORMATION

The Dene of the Northwest Territories

Rec'd:
Order No. *Free*
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The Dene (Pronounced de náy) or Indian people of the Mackenzie District of Canada's Northwest Territories have occupied a vast area of land totaling 450,000 square miles for the past 25,000 to 30,000 years. They speak four Athapaskan languages which are similar enough to allow some intercommunication (the word "dene" or one of similar sound means "the people" in each tongue).

PRE-HISTORY

The modern history of the Dene of the Northwest Territories dates from their first contact with Europeans in the middle of the 18th century. Of their ancient history little is known, for they kept only oral records.

In fact the question of how long man has inhabited the Mackenzie area may never be answered. It is possible that as early as 25 to 30 thousand years ago a relatively ice-free migration route could have existed from Alaska along the upper portions of the Mackenzie River, through the Yukon and southeast along a narrow strip in the vicinity of the present Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

During this period, Asiatic hunters stalking big game animals might have followed them across the land bridge into Alaska. From there they divided into many groups, always moving south through the forested land which borders the Yukon River, to eventually reach the Mackenzie River corridor. Archaeological evidence uncovered in the Great Bear Lake area and several sites in the southern Yukon confirm the route. No one really knows why the migrations ceased or when. Most authorities agree that with the exception of the Eskimos in the north, the last Indians came some six to eight thousand years ago. Artifacts found in the Great Bear Lake area have been estimated to be seven thousand years old.

The most recent of the migrants were the Dene or Athapascans. Of all the Indian Language groups in North America, theirs is the most widespread and is in evidence from the Bering Sea to New Mexico.

THE TRIBES

In the middle of the 18th century seven tribes were in possession of the area: Four of them; the Slaves, Dogribs, Hare and Yellowknives, lived in the Mackenzie lowlands on either side of the great River or on the edge of the Canadian shield. Two groups; the Nahanni and Loucheux (Kutchin), dwelt on the eastern ranges of the Cordillera. The Chipewyan were generally found east of Great Slave Lake and the Slave River and were the most numerous of the seven tribes.

The Chipewyan

The name of this important family of Indians was bestowed on them by the Cree and means 'pointed skins', from the Cree word Chipwayanawok. The name referred to the style of their clothing. The deerskin shirts worn like a poncho by both sexes were often left with a point or queue at the back and front.

Early historians said their habitat was the area near the Churchill River and the Athabasca and Great Slave lakes. There are now three bands in the Northwest Territories with a total population of about 900.

In pre-European times their population was estimated at 3,500. Famine and European diseases, well known in the early histories of all Indian groups, took their toll of the Chipewyan people. In 1782 almost 90 percent of their population died of smallpox and hunger. Since then they have recovered slowly and today they number about 4,000, of whom 900 live in the Northwest Territories.



GEORGE CALEF

Most of the Dene live in small settlements.

The Yellowknives

Most of the area east of the Mackenzie River was occupied by Slavey, Dogrib and Hare Indians; the outer rim to the edge of the barren grounds was claimed by the Yellowknife. The people frequented the Upper Coppermine River and gathered the native copper in the area, fashioning it into tools and weapons for trade and earning the name "Yellowknives".

Before contact with Europeans, the population of the Yellowknives was estimated at 450. But they had a valuable commodity to trade until the coming of iron goods of foreign manufacture. With their source of power and wealth gone, they moved south where they came into conflict with the Dogrib and Hare people.

They were defeated in battle in 1823 and never recovered their power. By 1836 they were reduced to only 70 families. A Hudson's Bay census in 1859 listed 207 Yellowknives at Fort Resolution and 12 at Fort Rae. Many were absorbed by the Chipewyans, with whom they had a close affiliation by

language. Today there are about 500 descendants of the group that gave its name to the capital of the Northwest Territories.

The Dogribs

North of the Slaves and over the interior region between Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake was the home of the Thlingchadinne or 'dogflank people'.

Hudson's Bay Company reports for 1858 gave the population of the Dogribs as 926. In 1906 Catholic Missionaries estimated there were 1,150. Reliable estimates number them at about 1,600 today, and they live chiefly in the area surrounding the community of Rae, 65 miles northwest of the city of Yellowknife.

The Slaveys

The Slavey Indians are the largest Athapaskan-speaking group in the Northwest Territories. Their name for themselves is Etchareotinne, 'people dwelling in the shelter'. The name Slaves or Slaveys was given to them by the French and English and is believed

to be a translation of the derisive Cree word awokanak.

The Etchareotinne had six tribal subdivisions with little political cohesion. Their territory lay west of Great Slave Lake and the Upper Mackenzie to the Rocky Mountains, including the lower Liard Valley.

In 1807 many of the Beaver Indians from the Peace River joined the Slaves in the vicinity of Fort Simpson. The Slaves were generally peaceful people, although they drove the Nahanni from the Upper Liard region into the mountains. They were never populous, and before the arrival of Europeans were estimated to number only 1,250.

The Hare

The people who lived on both sides of the Mackenzie River below Great Bear Lake called themselves Kawchodinne, 'people of the great hares'. They hunted north to the tree-line in the vicinity of the upper Anderson River and on the north side of Great Bear Lake.

Within their territory they were loosely grouped into four to six bands. Those living on the margins of the forest depended on caribou and those near the river caught great quantities of fish. Arctic hare provided most of their clothing and at times they depended on it entirely for food.

The Hare Indians were never numerous, and a great many died of starvation in 1841. In 1848 their population was given as 467; today there are about 800 residing near Fort Franklin and Fort Good Hope. A small group known as the 'end of the earth people' live around Colville Lake, northwest of Great Bear Lake.

Both the Hare and Nahani tribes speak a dialect similar to Slavey.

The Nahanni

The Nahanni live in the mountainous country to the west of the Mackenzie River.

The area occupied by the Nahanni is generally measured from 57 degrees north to 65 degrees north to where they border on the Kutchin people. Their language differs greatly from that of the Sekani and Carrier people who are their neighbours in British Columbia and from that of their northern neighbours.

Their western neighbours, the Tlingit of Alaska, have had a great influence on their social organization and by the end of the 19th century they had to some extent adopted a clan system and the potlatch. At the turn of the century their population was estimated at 1,000. Today they are estimated to number 400.

The Kutchin [or Loucheux]

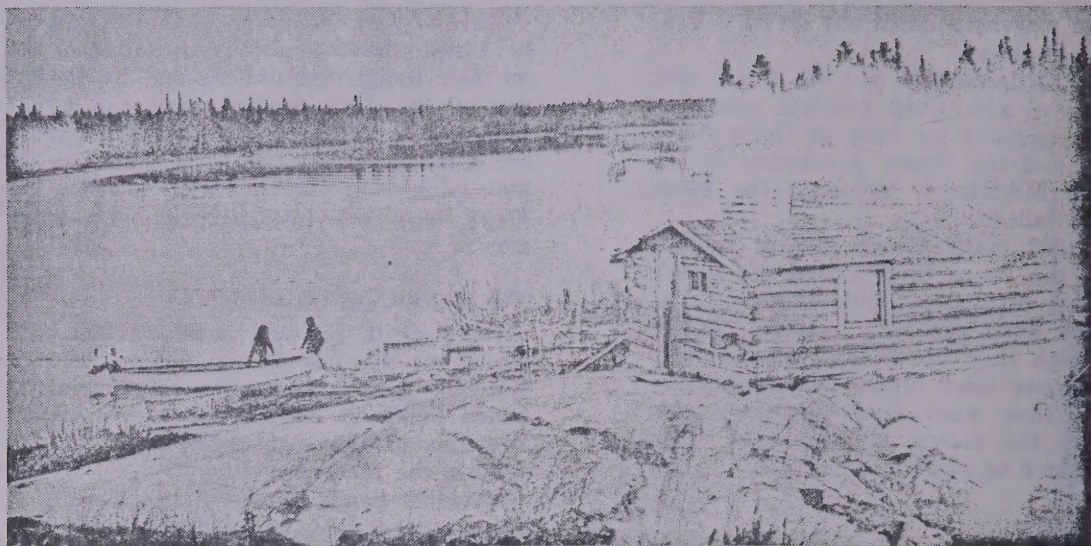
The Kutchin are the most northerly branch of the Athapascan people. The Kutchin nation comprised 11 major bands living in Alaska and the lower stretches of the Peel River, and the delta of the Mackenzie River.

Individual bands of the Kutchin were more independent of each other than most Athapascan peoples. Their way of life contained many adaptations. Methods of travel and styles of clothing were taken from the Eskimo, while their social organization came from the more westerly Indians of Alaska. The Kutchin on the Mackenzie felt these social influences less.

Three castes were recognized and marriage between members of the same clan was almost unknown. The children inherited their mother's caste but usually lived with their father's caste. A mild form of slavery in the form of attachment to a family was practised. Only noted medicine men or appointed chiefs who had property, such as caribou fences or corrals, had more than one wife.

TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLES

Traditionally, the Dene were wandering hunters. They battled for survival in one of the world's most cruel and unpredictable environments. Their world was the vast belt of forest wilderness which stretches across the northland - dense forest, mainly of spruce and pine with some birch, poplar and willow, dotted with plentiful lakes, rivers and streams. There the Indians hunted many varieties of game: moose, bear and musk-ox where possible, mountain goat farther west, smaller creatures like beaver and rabbits, but most of all, the ubiquitous meat source of the subarctic, the caribou. Some tribes tended to specialize: the Hare Indians are so called because they relied on the Arctic hare for food and clothing.



BRIAN THOMPSON

Old log cabin near the Dogrib community of Rae.

Most of the tribes supplemented their diet with fish. As nomads, they moved through the forest following the game, particularly the migrating caribou herds. During the short but splendid northern summer, the caribou moved northwards on to the treeless, lichen-covered 'Barrens' of the sub-Arctic tundra, and some of the Indians followed them. The Slaveys rarely left the forest, even for caribou. During winter all the tribes fled back following the caribou to the shelter of the trees.

The homes of these Indians were lodges of hides stretched over a framework of poles, while in summer temporary huts made of brush were common.

A rectangular hut of logs was sometimes used by the Nahanni and the Slavey Indians in winter. The Dogribs used their skin tipis in winter, well banked with snow, and with a fire on the earth floor to keep the family warm. The Loucheux did not travel much in the winter and had a more permanent dwelling built half underground. Sometimes more than one family co-operated in its construction and shared its shelter. In general, winter shelters were the same as those used in summer, but more substantially built and not as readily abandoned. These solid huts lasted several years and could be repaired.

As migratory hunters the inhabitants of the Mackenzie region kept only such

tools and implements as were necessary, and which could not be manufactured on the campsite from local materials.

The men wore breechcloths, leggings and moccasins of caribou or other warm skins; they wore long shirts or tunics in winter, sometimes with hoods attached in the Eskimo way. The women wore long one-piece dresses. These garments were mostly plain, or decorated only with a few porcupine quills - except among the Kutchin, who tended towards decorated garments, hair dressing, face painting and other refinements learnt from the Tlingit and other tribes near the Pacific.

Before Europeans arrived, dogs were seldom used for transportation though they were domesticated by the Indians. The animals were small and of little use except for hunting. (Dogs as a source of power among the Indians of the area came after the white man, according to the research of Diamond Jenness of the National Museum of Canada). Toboggans and sleighs piled with the family food and possessions were hauled by hand. Toboggans were better suited to the slightly timbered country than sleds with runners. Where the woods were dense, a shorter toboggan was used and the trail chosen wound around the trees and stumps. Lobsticks - trees with all the branches removed except the crown, were common markers for trails and caches of food.

In winter, as in summer, Indian families followed the waterways whenever possible. On the big lakes when the snow was swept clean by the wind, dragging a toboggan was easier than on land.

The construction of canoes for summer travel took place in the spring when the sap was running and the bark easy to peel in large pieces. There was some variety in the northern canoes. Birch bark was the favourite material but the tree does not grow as large as it does in eastern Canada and only small and heavily gummed and patched canoes could be made from it. Spruce bark was used to make larger canoes as was moosehide which was stretched over a spruce and willow frame.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The social structure was not complex: the bands were family-linked groups in which the best hunters might be titular leaders able to offer guidance, but had no real authority or claims on obedience. Only the Kutchin, again through contact with the Pacific coast, had clan-like societies within the tribe, but these were not extensive.

When several independent family groups came together at a favourite fishery or hunting place, it was a time of rejoicing, communal dancing and games. The kind of dancing varied with the occasion. Some involved feasting and the exchange of gifts, but most were simply dances to release excess energy and express joy. The step was a kind of shuffle, with women taking smaller steps than the men and the whole group moving around a central fire. Music was provided by a drum or drums. The drum generally consisted of a single hide, from which the hair had been removed, stretched over a willow frame. It had a handle attached and it was beaten with a heavy stick to produce a resonant booming sound. The drummer often sang an accompaniment and was joined by the dancers. Some dances were endurance contests and were performed to exhaustion.

Games and contests also took place during these reunions. Simple guessing games, gambling games, and games of strength and skill with weapons were all common. Minor disputes were settled by a wrestling match.



BRIAN THOMPSON

Trapping still supplements the income of many Dene.

THE FUR TRADE

The way of life practised by the Indians of the Yukon and Northwest Territories was not disturbed by the arrival of Europeans in Canada until the establishment of a Hudson's Bay Company Fur trading post on the Churchill River in 1717. Goods from this post trickled to them through internal trade, as they did from the Russian post in Alaska.

In 1789 Alexander Mackenzie, a fur trader with the Northwest Company of Montreal, travelled by canoe from his post on Lake Athabasca, past Fort Resolution which had been built on Great Slave Lake in 1786, and thence down the river that bears his name to the Arctic Ocean. His reports opened the fur trade to the Northwest Company and to a host of private traders and wintering partners.

The Hudson's Bay Company also carried out many journeys of exploration in what was then Rupert's Land. By the mid 18th century the whole area was fairly well mapped, except for the Inuit (Eskimo) country. Many posts were built and abandoned during this period in a process of trial and error, but by 1850 most of the settlements that exist today had been founded.

CANADIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE DENE

The Canadian Government claims to have purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870. The Company which had exercised almost sovereign rights in the vast territory for 200 years maintained its commercial advantage without monopoly, but the administration of civil affairs passed to the federal government.

After the discovery of gold in the Yukon and the increased traffic through the area, the federal government set up a commission to make treaty number 8 with northern Indians in 1899. James A. Macrae was appointed a Commissioner in 1900 to take adhesions to Treaty Eight from the Indians at Fort St. John, B.C. and those who came to trade at Fort Resolution in the N.W.T. The Dogribs, Chipewyans and Yellowknives of Great Slave Lake and the Slaveys of Lower Hay River were all added to the treaty that already covered many native people in Northern Alberta.

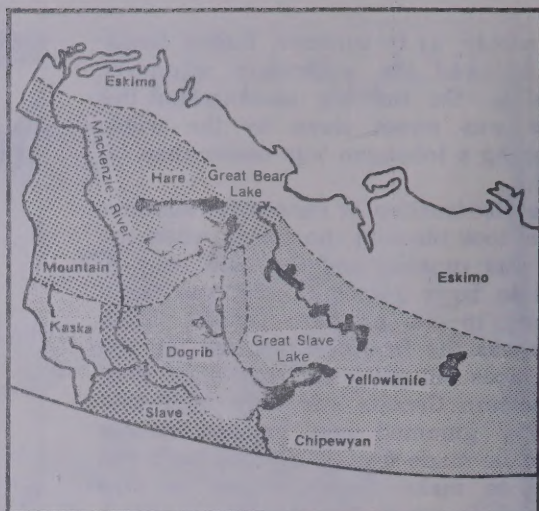
Provision was made, according to the treaty papers, for lands on the basis of one square mile per family of five when such lands were needed as well as an annual payment to all Dene who signed the treaty and their descendants.

After 1907 there had been some proposals for a treaty with the Indians of the Mackenzie Valley. But because few settlers came to live permanently in the area, a treaty was not felt to be necessary. In the summer of 1921 after mineral discoveries in the N.W.T. seven chiefs and 12 headmen were asked to sign Treaty Number Eleven for their people. In all, 1,915 Indians received treaty money that year. provision was also made in this treaty for the setting aside of reserve lands at such time as the people indicated their need for them.

The written treaties 8 and 11 are not accepted by many Dene as the real versions of what their ancestors discussed with the treaty party. At present the N.W.T. Dene are negotiating through their own associations with the government of Canada to settle their land claims.

PRESENT CONDITIONS

The pattern of life among the Indians of the Northwest Territories is rapidly



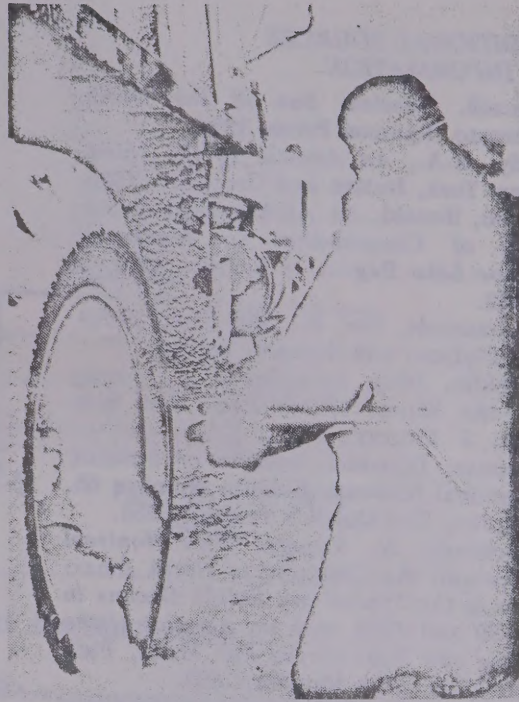
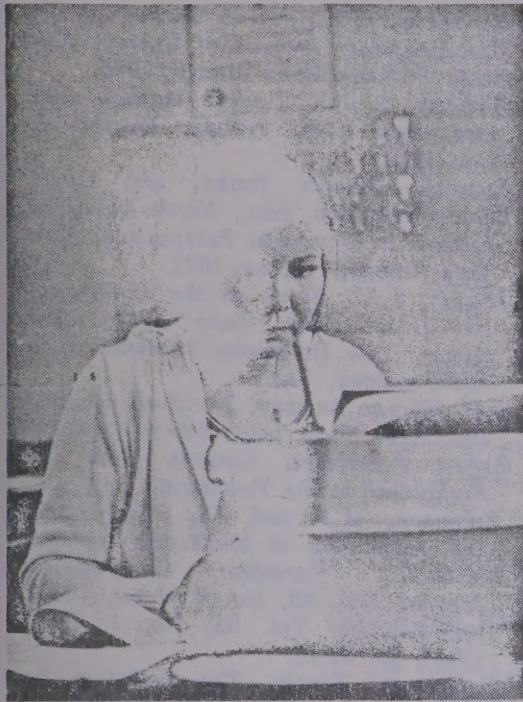
Different tribal groups in the N.W.T.

changing, although there are still some families who live off the land entirely. Every year there is a seasonal movement in most communities of part of the population, as families go to the fish camps and organized hunting parties seek fresh meat in season.

The old trading economy has given way to a cash or credit system. Although fur continues to bring in cash, seasonal and steady wage employment, welfare payments and allowances for the aged and for children are the most important sources of income.

Fur marketed in 1974-75 was valued at \$2,090,000. Commercial fishing, mainly on Great Slave Lake, produced tons of fish, mostly whitefish and lake trout. Guiding and work on oil exploration survey crews gives seasonal wage employment to many young men.

Once isolated except for the barge traffic in the summer, the entire Mackenzie District is now served by scheduled and charter aircraft. The Mackenzie Highway connects Yellowknife, Fort Simpson and other more southerly settlements with the highways of Alberta. The Dempster Highway, when completed, will connect the more northerly settlements with the south. There is also rail link between Pine Point and Grimshaw, Alberta.



BRIAN THOMPSON

Many of the younger people have left traditional pursuits for the wage economy.

Water transportation is still the best means of moving heavy equipment and bulk supplies. The Mackenzie River system is 1,700 miles long. In the winter of 1971 the first heavy equipment was moved by truck from Edmonton to Inuvik over a winter road bulldozed across the frozen tundra.

SEASONS OF THE DENE

For most of the Dene each of the four seasons has its own special activities. Autumn begins early in September. It is a short season that ends when the rivers and lakes freeze and the first snow falls. Families with children of school age leave their temporary summer hunting camps and return to their settlements. Ice fishing begins for dog and human food. Winter firewood is gathered, and stacked outside the house.

The winter trapping season begins when the marten, mink, lynx, otter, weasel, fisher, beaver and fox are prime. The trapline is checked about twice a week. Moose or caribou are shot to supply fresh meat and bait for traps. Rabbits are snared, usually by the hunter's wife.

Spring lasts from early May to the middle of June. This is a busy time in the Mackenzie Delta and other muskrat and beaver areas. The hunters usually have camps that require only light repair each season.

Summer begins in the second week of June and lasts until the end of August. It is the time when children are home from school, often from residential school or from the south. Families gather for visits and many people move into tents. Canoes and outboard motors are repaired, and when the weather permits, gardens are sown.

POPULATION

The first available census figures for the Northwest Territories are for 1895. They report 4,376 Dene in the Northwest Territories.

Population figures became more accurate after 1912 when the boundaries were defined in their present form. That year there were 3,589 Dene living in the Northwest Territories. After several years of decline the population stabilized and then began to increase steadily. In 1974 there were 7,119 Dene of Treaty status in the Northwest Territories and about 7,000 Metis (or mixed ancestry).

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GROUPS:

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- Metis Association of the N.W.T., Box 1375, Yellowknife, N.W.T.
- Committee for the Original Peoples' Entitlement, Inuvik, N.W.T.
- Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alta.
- National Museum of Man, 360 Lisgar Street, Ottawa, Ontario.
- Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Information Section, 400 Laurier Ave. W., Ottawa.
- Institute for Northern Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Sask.
- Department of Anthropology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa State.

For further information contact:
Department of Information,
Government of the N.W.T.,
Yellowknife, N.W.T.
Telephone 403-873-7556
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